

Romance writer turns serious with deaf character in teen book

By Judith Montminy
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

DUXBURY - Four years ago, Leslie D. Guccione, 42, raised a few eyebrows in town because she hung around the Duxbury town pier every morning before dawn, talking to the harbor-master and the local fishermen. She was not becoming a waterfront groupie, Guccione said. She was trying to learn as much as she could by "just watching the guys."

As a result of her early morning adventures, she has been able to include realistic situations in the New England-based romance stories she writes for the Harlequin/Silhouette Desire book series. Her books have been translated into seven languages, and now her lead character in "Branigan's Touch" is featured as Harlequin/Silhouette's man of the month for October, a new book-sales promotion.

Although she has been successful as a romance writer, all along Guccione has wanted to write serious fiction. The idea for her first hardcover book, "Tell Me How the Wind Sounds," was sparked by her explorations at the harbor. The book is scheduled for a November release by Scholastic Books in New York.

It represents a breakthrough in Guccione's career, she said, and is charting new ground in teen litera-

ture, since one of the main characters is deaf.

"I wanted to write a normal story," one in which the main character "just happens to be deaf," Guccione said. The story takes place on Clark's Island and was inspired by Skip Bennett and Andrew Stout of Duxbury, Guccione said. They were the models for Jake Hackett, 16, Guccione's character.

When Guccione watched Bennett, 22, shellfishing on the mussel flats, she was struck by the solitary nature of his work.

The solitude of shellfishing, coupled with the silence of deafness, seemed to be a perfect match. "I was out to write a really good young adult novel that had a little bit of a twist to it," she said.

She turned to Stout, 15, for help. Stout became profoundly deaf as a result of a bout with meningitis when

he was 18 months old. "I got to know the Stouts, and Andrew was present. I watched him, and I watched how normal his life is," she said.

Stout helped Guccione learn sign language. "She was stiff with her hands at first," he said. But he appreciated her willingness to take the time to learn.

Two-language format

Guccione devised a special format to distinguish between the two languages in the book - English and American Sign Language. "When someone speaks, I have used the usual quotes," she said. "When someone signs, the dialogue is printed in italics. If a character speaks while signing, I have put the italicized word in quotes."

Suzanne Stout, Andrew's mother, read the manuscript to make sure the descriptions of the signs were correct. "I was her technical adviser," Suzanne Stout said.

"She kept asking me about feelings. Had she caught the feelings of the boy?" Stout said. The book is written from two perspectives - the boy's and that of Amanda Alden, 15.

The most difficult part to understand "is that what a deaf child goes through is the same thing other kids go through," Stout said, terming Andrew's deafness not a handicap but an inconvenience.

In the book, Alden snaps at her parents, "He isn't handicapped. He

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just can't hear, and you can't ignore that," Guccione shares Amanda's attitude about Jake's deafness. "I hope the readers will come away with the sense that life is for everybody," she said.

Frustration

Jake's deafness is an inconvenience that compounds the frustration of not being understood by the girl he is attracted to - a feeling experienced by many teen-agers, Guccione said.

"Adolescence is painful for a lot of kids, even without a handicap," she said. It is a time when it is difficult to communicate feelings under the best circumstances.

Guccione is encouraged that her book has received favorable reviews from the School Library Journal and from Robert Cormier, an established

author of teen fiction. "You can almost feel the salt spray on your cheeks," Cormier wrote.

"That's my art training," she said of Cormier's comment. When she was in high school at Wilmington (Del.) Friends School, she studied with Carolyn Wyeth in the artist's studio after school. Guccione credits Wyeth for giving her the ability to establish a strong, visual sense of place in her books.

After Guccione attended Queens College in Charlotte, N.C., where she was awarded the creative writing cup, friends persuaded her to move to Boston.

She worked in public relations for the American Heart Association, where she met her husband, Joe, and Carla Neggers, a student intern who later became a well-established romance writer. It was Neggers who put Guccione in touch with her editor in New York.

"It was never my intention to be a romance writer," Guccione said.

"You make money writing romance fiction. It's very lucrative," Guccione said. She earns "in the five digits" from her romance books and is careful not to knock the genre. "I can't cut my nose to spite my face," she said.

"I have a reputation now," she said. "I get fan mail. I'm really popular in Oklahoma." Her books are written under the names Leslie Davis, Leslie Davis Guccione and Leslie D. Guccione.

At the Romance Writers of America convention in Boston last summer, Guccione learned that writers and readers have been asking her agent if she is related to Bob Guccione, publisher of Penthouse magazine. "He's my husband's father's first cousin," she said. "He's from the same family, but we have no contact."

Guccione's romance writing has made her a known quantity to editors. When she told her agent that she wanted to write a "real book" about hearing and deaf teen-agers, she was put in touch with editor Ann Reit, who needed writers for Scholastic's "cheerleader books," a romance series for teens.

After Guccione wrote three books for the series and proved herself to Reit, her agent submitted the single title idea for "Tell Me How the Wind Sounds."

Next spring, Scholastic plans to publish another hardcover book by Guccione. The working title is "The Whale Book," and it will be geared to readers 10 and under. The story centers around a young girl who thinks her father's business is endangering whales. "That contract came as a direct result of 'Tell Me How the Wind Sounds,'" Guccione said.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID L. RYAN

Author Leslie D. Guccione talks via sign language with Andrew Stout of Duxbury, who is deaf and also the inspiration for her new book.